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AUTHOR Brown, Marion; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The English department of a technical college has developed a writing program that uses real audiences and real situations to better prepare students for the communication requirements of their professions. The exercises for each class are focused on the course content. In an advanced technical communication course, senior design, the students are required to build a prototype or model, collect and analyze data, or write a computer simulation. The students are then given an audience for whom the project might have been carried out and are asked to write a report on that project. In the freshman composition class, students learn to write letters of application and develop resumes for the jobs they will apply for while they are students. The course in creative writing focuses on writing for publication, which provides both an immediate audience in the publisher and a primary audience in the readers. Students in engineering technology learn effective technical writing by directing their memos and progress reports to their "supervisor" instructor. Composition students may evaluate the writings of technical students to provide a nontechnical audience for assembly guides or operator's manuals. (HTH)

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WRITING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: REAL AUDIENCES, REAL SITUATIONS

Marion Brown, Harriett Hogan, and Maria Kreppel

Since our English department is part of a technical college, we have more contact with career courses our students take and with the jobs they will obtain than many English departments have. As a result of this contact, we have developed a writing program using, as much as possible, real audiences and real situations. This approach is incorporated in the full range of our writing courses--Advanced Technical Communication, Composition I, and our developmental writing courses.

Traditional writing assignments, essays or themes destined to be read only by the English instructors, too often involve a topic neither the student nor the instructor cares about, or the assignment focuses on literature, an area in which the teacher is an authority. Consequently, a novice is writing for an expert.

J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson accurately state in the preface to their writing text, Designing Technical Reports (Bobbs-Merrill, 1976),

> In college, students write for an audience of one person - a professor; in industry, they must learn to write for a large, diverse audience in an organization. In college, they write for a reader who knows the field and probably knows more about their technical material than the writer does; in industry, they must learn to write to people who perhaps do not know the field or who almost certainly know less about the material than the writer. In college, they write for pedagogical purposes - to demonstrate to a professor their mastery of concepts, processes, and information; in industry, their mastery is assumed, and they must write for instrumental purposes—to help people in an organization make judgements and act upon results they present. In short, even though engineering students may have written quite a bit by the time of graduation, little in their college writing experience prepares them for the communication situations they face as professionals.

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Clearly, a need for writing to demonstrate subject matter mastery exists. However, a need for writing to communicate also exists. Furthermore, traditional writing assignments frequently reward only the talented writer, leaving the ordinary student with an "I can't write" complex. Yet most of these students will find themselves in professions that compel them to communicate in writing. Considering the funcational writing tasks technicians and engineers perform, we believe students must develop a habit of accuracy. They also need a flexible style that fits the purpose of the writing and is adapted to the reader. And if their writing is to be anything more than a recital of facts, they must be sensitive to language and to the role that tone can play in a message.

Thus, our program includes assignments and instructional methods that address diverse audiences and actual situations. As Deborah Andrews and Margaret Blickle define audience in Technical Writing: Principles and Forms (Mac Millan, 1978), the primary audience is the direct receiver of the message, the person or group for whom the writing is intended. The immediate audience consists of people such as supervisors who must approve the writing. Finally, the person or group affected by actions the writing entails comprise the secondary audience. To provide realistic writing experience involving these audiences, we use assignments such as a proposal for a senior technical project, a letter of application for a coop job, writing for publication, and communication problems for student writers and readers.

AN ADVANCED TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

In an upper division composition course the instructor serves as consultant, workshop leader, and editor helping students prepare proposals and final reports for a technical course, Senior Design. The design course requires a student to build a prototype or model, collect and analyze date, and/or write a computer simulation. Students, first, submit a project proposal to the technical instructor.

Later, they will deliver an oral presentation to a general audience of faculty, students, and guests from business and industry. Finally, they must prepare a written report of the entire project.

At least two audiences, and sometimes three, receive the Senior Design reports. The technical instructor may be the primary audience; the English instructor and fellow-students may be the immediate audience. But often a client or company is the primary audience. Also, all final reports are bound and placed in the college library, and a report from one year may form the basis of a project for another year. Students who may use a report to initiate a subsequent project become part of the secondary audience.

Last year, for example, one student analyzed energy consumption and heat loss for a local YMCA. The final report, submitted to the Mechanical Engineering Technology department for Senior Design, was intended primarily for the Y Board of Directors. Another group of students designed and tested an off-road mini baja vehicle for a competition. Since this is an annual event, the group this year will use the reports filed by last year's designers.

In the composition class, formats for the proposals and reports are presented through texts, articles, and lectures. But the major activity of the class focuses on a writing workshop. For example, students write an introduction which we ditto and distribute to members of the class. While fellow-students make comments and suggestions, the writer takes notes, marking up the copy so that a revision can be made based on the discussion. While this technique does not produce perfect pieces of writing, students do revise to provide more specific, accurate information, and to improve the logical flow of information. Sometimes four or five examples of a particular report section, such as the project objectives, shown on the overhead will spark discussion of ways to improve the writing. Seeing a set of objectives, not parallel in content or grammar, has prompted other students to examine their own objective sections and to find similar errors.

This workshop atmosphere helps to break the custom of writing for an instructor, and it provides immediate reaction to the writing.

Another useful technique is oral presentation. While oral presentations in this course serve as a rehearsal for students' formal technical presentations, they also provide an opportunity to demonstrate the effect that the medium being used and the audience has on the selection of material. Tailoring information and data for a general, listening audience contrasts with the presentation of technical information in a written report. Additionally, this rehearsal can aid students because serious omissions or insufficient explanations can be highlighted by audience reactions, enabling students to revise before the formal oral presentation.

FRESHMAN COMPOSITION ASSIGNMENTS

Application Letters and Resumes

Much earlier, usually the second quarter of the freshman year, students apply for coop jobs. In the freshman composition course, one assignment concerns planning and writing letters of application and composing resumes. Students write for a particular purpose to a specific audience. Application letters provide the opportunity to practice a reader-centered sytle. Many of the first drafts will begin every sentence with "I." After we put one or two of these on the overhead, students will begin to find alternative ways of expressing the ideas. And after seeing several letters that say "I have always been interested in electronics" or "I am an excellent student," writers will begin to see the value of using more concrete information.

Preparing a resume for an actual job application is one of the most worthwhile writing exercises for the student. The writer learns to organize information, write concisely and accurately, and to use information persuasively. Students must assess their strengths: Should education or experience be stressed? Where should the most effective points be placed? How can information be given succinctly?

These writing activities are especially relevant since they often take place concurrently with the students' search for coop jobs. All of our freshman English students work on application letters and resumes. For some, who choose a creative writing option rather than technical writing, we offer another challenge.

Creative Writing

Writing for publication provides another opportunity for using assignments with real audiences in composition classes. Publication lends itself extremely well to creative writing sections, generally attracting students with adventurous spirits who accept the serious responsibility and the risks involved. The prospect of professional editors, the primary audience, perusing students' work may, initially, strike a fearful chord, but it also encourages students to take particular pains with their composing. Not only do potential publishees become more correct and careful writers, but quickly understand the discipline of writing, of organizing time and materials to meet publication deadlines. Additionally, teachers discover an added bonus: the plague of plagiarism disappears. For the teacher of a publication class, student enthusiasm is generally enough compensation for any drawbacks, such as juggling projects among students with widely varying abilities and levels of responsibility while coordinating class assignments that develop and build each writer's skills, all the while preserving each writer's ego and confidence. But, since the teacher is the immediate, not primary audience, students seek and accept critical evaluation more readily. The teacher/editor becomes an ally in the process.

Student writers view themselves as professionals for this class. They must decide on the mode of composition, whether to concentrate on essay, short fiction, or poetry. Very quickly, each writer must find the best possible publication outlet. Studying Writer's Market is probably the quickest road to the publisher.

To supplement the information in Writer's Market the teacher generally can find local publishing outlets: area newspapers, small journals, pamphlets and magazines are often more fertile than out-of-town sources. In any event, by the time students have chosen their modes of composition and examined markets, they are intensely aware of the real audience that awaits the manuscripts. Consequently, each writer prepares that manuscript becoming increasingly conscious of choices and options in writing, as well as in sensitivity to language and tone, all major goals for writers.

Probably the crucial role for the teacher of a publication class is that of first editor and "ego-guarder." Students, because of their fear of failure as professional writers, must be encouraged and assured as they compete in the market place. First and foremost, the teacher must assure them that a rejection slip from a publisher does not equal failure as a professional writer, or as a human being. One quick trick to demonstrate the trials and tribulations of professional writers is to bring in, for display and discussion, rejection slips--some humorous, some terse, some creative. Moreover, it is essential to create rapport as individually as possible; one recommendation is to keep the classes small enough for workshop sessions. Workshops permit students to read and react to their fellows' work, a major function of class time. Reactions reinforce the awareness of audience, and students, in effect, then become the immediate audience.

Assignments for the workshop vary. Remembering that the students are working at various stages of their manuscripts, the teacher can assign short exercises that concentrate on particular, specific aspects of writing. For example, students might spend ten or fifteen minutes recreating an action of a character to elicit a hint at character traits; on another occasion students can work on only speech patterns or dialogue that evoke a character clue. Other possible assignments include describing scenes or actions concentrating on one sensory image at a time; working with analogies; discussing factual data that contributes to creating reality.

Texts are plentiful for this type of course. Experiences by Florence H. Morgan and Fred Morgan (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975) supplies a plethora of examples and assignments to intensify the students' chances to observe individuals, scenes, actions, and to learn to generalize from those observations. Additionally, that text provides various modes such as satire, fable, and even advice-giving. An essential guide for prospective publishers is Strunk and White's Elements of Style (MacMillan, 1979): no one explains vigorous writing better. Other source materials of particular value for the novice writer in any mode include Writing Fiction by R. V. Cassill (2nd ed., Prentice-Hall, 1975), which addresses audience awareness and how to tap reader reserves, and How to Get Happily Published by Nancy Evans and Judith Appelbaum (Harper and Row, 1978) a useful adjunct to Writer's Market.

The limited time in a ten-week quarter often hinders many students from finding the appropriate audience for their manuscripts. However, some students are successful; often those students whose work the teacher might not regard as superior do get published. And even occasional successful publication generates further belief in and awareness of audience. But whatever the success rate for students, a Writing for Publication class, concentrating on audience, creates a constructive atmosphere in which to hone writing skills.

ASSIGNMENTS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING STUDENTS

Each year there are a number of students admitted into our college through a special program called Preparatory Engineering Technology (PET). PET students are identified primarily because of math deficiencies. Their curriculum includes basic work in algebra, trigonometry, physics and reading skills, plus four credit hours of English composition. For these students, the experience of writing in real situations to real audiences is essential, since many enter the course knowing they cannot write and waiting for the instructor to prove it. To move beyond that self-concept, they have to experience their own writing's success. They must feel a need to communicate what they submit to the instructor and receive real audience

reaction. The question is how to achieve this.

One workable solution shifts the function of the instructor from grader to that of primary audience. Throughout the course, the instructor asks for necessary information regarding students' progress, and it becomes their job to research and compose that information clearly and accurately within prescribed forms such as memos and reports. As the course proceeds, the forms grow more complex. When students compose memos, they work on the skill of developing paragraphs. Later, when they write progress reports to the instructor they concentrate on outlining. Throughout the quarter, students submit periodic reports on the results of their workbook exercises, which they grade and tabulate themselves. Finally, in a formal report, they analyze the development of their writing skills throughout the term.

Once students get in the habit of writing to, rather than for, the instructor, it is not so difficult for them to identify other audiences for their prose. A new summer employee who needs to understand the operation of Kings Island's taffy oven or the trainee who must perform the series of steps necessary to assemble a Big Mac become primary audiences for expository essays. All comments from the instructor/editor, who in this case is the immediate audience, must pertain to what those primary audiences need to know.

For PET students, the skills involved in developing and ordering paragraphs, in sticking to a single purpose, or in writing complete sentences are much easier to practice when the first order of business is audience identification and when a real writing situation offers immediate, honest reaction. In these situations the instructor can ask, "Why do you give me so much information in the second paragraph?" instead of scribbling "coherence" in the margin.

Students Writing To Students

A final example of real audience/real situation rhetoric employs a technique appropriate to any composition class at almost any level. It involves the students

in writing to each other. Since our engineering undergraduates develop design and drafting skills in their technical courses, the composition classroom seems the obvious place to practice communicating these designs to others.

Beginning composition students may be given any sort of object which is not easily named, and which is not composed of simple geometric shapes. Children's toys offer many possibilities, but something such as a hand-operated can opener will do. Objects like these force students to work with language to describe shape instead of relying upon labels. A group of five or six students work together to collect appropriate data before each of them writes an individual description of an object. During this process the group members act as the immediate audience for each writer. The student writer then trades a description with another student reader whose job is to produce a drawing that suggests the original. Students are primary audiences throughout, and any questions or problems the student reader has must be addressed in writing to the student writer. The instructor does not get involved until both reader and writer agree that the description and drawing are clear and accurate. At this point, they sign and submit all descriptions, drawings and correspondence.

A variation of this assignment for more advanced composition students asks them to use Capsela Building Materials (plastic modules, gears and wiring) to design a moving apparatus. Once the design is operational, each student writer composes an assembly guide from which another student reader attempts to build the apparatus. Again, all communication between student writers and readers must be written, and the instructor stays out of it until both writer and reader agree on the outcome. Sometimes design changes occur during this process in addition to assembly guide revisions. Whatever turns the process may take, however, both writer and reader learn valuable lessons about real communication.

CONCLUSION

All of us are familiar with injunctions to remember the reader as we prod our

students to develop composition skills. In 1950, McCrimmon reminded the first users of Writing with a Purpose (Houghton-Mifflin), that "a writer is always addressing readers." More recently, in Directions in Technical Writing and Communication (Baywood Publishing, 1978), Earl Britton has announced "The Trouble with Technical Writing is Freshman English." In his essay, he deplores directing the flow of information "from an ill-informed freshman to a well-informed instructor" who insists on knowing more about the material than the writer does, and emphasizing "thought quality" while ignoring "communicative effectiveness."

Britton concludes by suggesting that technical writing might indeed replace freshman English, but that it be taught during the senior year because "it's a delight to read papers prepared by well-informed authors." If the choice were ours, we would all opt for "well-informed authors" who would take our courses last--when they know something to write about. We also suspect that our colleagues in the technical departments would choose to place their courses in the same spot and for similar reasons. Unfortunately, the choice is not ours. In the meantime, we need to offer our students a sense of their own worth and responsibility as writers at whatever level we encounter them. The composition curriculum we have described offers these benefits without sacrificing composition skills traditionally taught.